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ABSTRACT

A comparison of British and Australian experiences with language awareness curricula and the contexts in which they have been offered led to three conclusions: (1) language awareness courses are not a panacea for the problems of the second language teaching profession, and should not be designed both to contribute to the success of the foreign language curriculum and as a curriculum component in its own right; (2) whichever of the two orientations is chosen, integration with other curriculum areas will be both difficult and effective; and (3) language awareness courses may be more appropriate at the upper than the lower secondary level. (MSE)

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SOME ASPECTS OF AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE WITH LANGUAGE AWARENESS COURSES

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SOME ASPECTS OF AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE WITH LANGUAGE AWARENESS COURSES

T J Quinn and N Trounce

1. Introduction

A movement somewhat akin to the current interest in language awareness courses appears to have begun in Australian secondary schools in the early seventies; it peaked in 1976, and has been in a state of steady decline since then (at least in the statistical sense). At first sight, it is perhaps surprising that British teachers are addressing language awareness issues some 10 years later than their Australian counterparts. There are, no doubt, very good reasons for this state of affairs: the "state of the art" in language curricula in both countries is markedly different, and this fact provides two completely different contexts for language awareness initiatives. We believe, nonetheless, that some reflections on the Australian experience may be useful to British teachers in their deliberations on this important matter. The purpose of this paper is thus to provide an overview of certain aspects of Australian language awareness courses from about 1972 to 1983.

It is important to indicate the sources of this brief descriptive study. One of the authors (TJQ) has been an observer (and partly promoter) of the language awareness movement in Australia since it began, and thus had a good deal of impressionistic knowledge of the field. To make this study more objective, however, we undertook a more systematic survey, deriving data from three sources:

(a) a study of all available published documentation: course materials, journal articles and government reports, statistics and analyses;
(b) a series of interviews with a wide cross-section of teachers, teacher trainers, researchers, curriculum consultants and inspectors;
(c) visits to schools still teaching language awareness programmes.

Our data and observations come from only two of the six Australian States, Victoria and New South Wales, and predominantly from the former. This limitation is less serious than might appear at first sight, for two reasons: these two States cover some 65% of the total school population of Australia; and the language awareness movement has been far more predominant in Victoria than in any other State. Finally, our data comes principally from the State education systems - the public sector - with some limited input from Roman Catholic schools, that part of the private sector which looks after the education of some 20% of Australian children.

2. Terminology and definitions

The language awareness movement in Australia, like most other educational innovations, has generated a bewildering array of terms for what is essentially the same sort of curriculum. The terms most commonly encountered would include: language awareness course; introductory language programme; general language course; language and communication studies; language and culture studies; and introduction to language studies. The most common would be "introductory language programme" (ILP) and "general language course" (GLC), each representing a somewhat different emphasis. From this point on, we wish to exclude ILP, and use GLC as the most common Australian equivalent of what is called language awareness in Britain. This decision requires some explanation.

ILP has been used in Australia to cover a curricular approach that shared some of the aims of a GLC, but which differed markedly in content, even though it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a particular programme belongs in one category or the other. An ILP usually means introductory study of two or three different languages, prior to and as a means of informing a choice between these languages as the subject of subsequent more serious and sustained study. Thus, for example, in Year 7 (the first year of secondary school), a school may have, as part of the compulsory core curriculum, one term (14 weeks) of French, one term of German and one term of Indonesian. At the end of the year, the pupil would be expected to elect one of French, German or Indonesian as the language which he/she will continue in Year 8 and beyond. There are, of course, many possible variations of this approach.

We wish to distinguish a GLC quite sharply from the ILP approach, as a GLC appears to be much more closely related to the British notion of language awareness. As a starting-point, we offer the rather awkwardly expressed definition of a GLC used by the Education Department of Victoria in its annual statistical survey of school curricula: "A general language course consists mainly of culture and linguistics, without any specific language being studied for as much as one term." It is probably more enlightening to list - albeit in vague and even negative terms - four common features that seem to be shared by GLC: they tend to be similar in CONTENT, DURATION, AGE LOCATION and OBJECTIVES.

(a) CONTENT. GLCs usually include some concepts derived from general linguistics, some background cultural information about a foreign society, and some minimal exposure to the techniques of language learning.
(b) DURATION. GLCs are short-term curricular components, in that they usually last only one year, or very occasionally two years.
(c) AGE LOCATION. GLCs are offered in Years 7 or 8, i.e., at the

beginning of secondary school, when pupils are 12-13 years of age.

(d) OBJECTIVES. GLCs have as their objectives something other than simply "learning a foreign language".

For the remainder of this paper we shall continue to use the terminology most common in Victorian schools, and comment almost exclusively on GLCs.

3. The growth and decline of GLCs: statistical data

The Department of Education in the State of Victoria began keeping statistical data in 1974, although such courses appear to have begun to appear some years before this. The pattern of growth, peak in 1976 and subsequent decline thereafter is illustrated clearly in Fig. 1. The actual statistics are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Numbers of Victorian State Secondary Schools teaching GLCs, 1974-83

1974	49	schools
1975	86	
1976	110	
1977	107	
1978	91	
1979	64	
1980	54	
1981	49	
1982	37	
1983	30	(approx)

Fig.1. Victorian State Secondary Schools Teaching GLCs, 1974-83

The 1983 figure is not completely accurate, because the statistical survey was not complete at the time of writing. In addition, there is some evidence suggesting that the steady decline of the previous years in fact levelled out in 1983: while 9 schools terminated their GLC in 1983, 10 different schools initiated new GLCs.

It remains clear from the statistical data, however, that the GLC movement started with a great burst, peaked quickly, then went into steady decline. This is a situation that requires explanation.

4. Why did GLCs begin?

It is easy to give a straightforward answer to this question: somebody (in fact, several people independently) came up with an idea, and the materials to implement it, at a time when the state of

foreign language teaching made the idea look attractive and relevant. We thus had a felicitous convergence of three essential components of any new movement in school curricula: the right timing, a challenging new idea, and readily usable materials promptly made available.

The time and emergence of GLCs in Australia is interesting. The movement started in the early seventies, which was a turning-point for the foreign language profession due to several factors, some of them felt world-wide, some of them peculiar to Australia. This was a time of fundamental re-thinking for the profession, as the panacea of audio-lingualism was beginning to look very shaky indeed. The Pennsylvania Project (Smith, 1970) had dashed the hopes of those who had put their faith in new methods and new machines, and Wilga Rivers' thesis (Rivers, 1964) had demonstrated that the faith was ill-founded anyway. Foreign language teachers were ready to look for new directions.

In Australia, this situation was exacerbated by several local factors. The traditional dominance of French in the foreign language curriculum - a dubious remnant of the British educational heritage - was under serious challenge. France and the French looked very remote from the Antipodes. Two new groups of languages began to look much more attractive: the languages of our Asian neighbours (Britain's "Far East" being Australia's "Near North"), and the languages of the hundreds of thousands of non-English-speaking immigrants who had made Australia their home in the great waves of post-war immigration. The Asian Studies movement and the multicultural Australia movement were looming large on the horizon. At the same time, the number of students taking the tradional foreign language (French) course was declining seriously, and "drop-out" rates were looking alarming: of those who did begin the study of French, most opted not to continue as soon as they were given the choice.

Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that the alternative approach of GLCs began to look very attractive indeed. The course materials published at the time, and notably De Fazio's Lingvo materials (see References), address many of the issues raised in the preceding paragraph: the course is offered as an alternative to the first two years (years 7 and 8) of a traditional foreign language course; it is claimed to be more interesting and more relevant to the students; it takes account of the multilingual nature of the Australian population; it aims to dispel "anti-foreigner" feelings and to make the migrant child aware and proud of his/her non-English heritage; and the languages offered for elementary study as illustrations of points made include Greek, Italian, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Indonesian and Japanese.

De Fazio's materials were by far the most popular during the heyday of GLCs, and it is interesting to note their orientation, even

though they are seldom used now. She described her approach as an "elementary historical linguistic" one, and called it a course in "Language Communication". The materials covered the origins of language; non-verbal communication; the history of languages; the structure of English; and comparative study of several languages, each one being accompanied with elementary cultural information about the foreign speech community, an introduction to the sound system and grammatical structure, and such activities as songs, poems, nursery rhymes, etc.

The aims of such courses were laudable indeed, and quite lofty. It is interesting to quote in full the list of aims which De Fazio drew up for her particular course (Lingvo teacher's manual, p15):

1. To increase the students' awareness of and interest in language as a means of communication.
2. To increase their range of vocabulary in their own language and their ability to structure their communication in their own language.
3. To enable students to make some simple comparisons with other languages with regard to such things as:

   a. Written - Type of script
      - Alphabets
      - Syntax
   b. Oral - Pronunciation
      - Idioms
4. To provide a background of interest and comparison from which to commence the study of a foreign language.
5. To prepare the students in the methods of foreign language learning.
6. To give the students a general backgroud on languages as one unit and give them some understanding of other lingual concepts besides their own even if they should never proceed with the study of a foreign language.

5. Why have GLCs declined in popularity?

Perhaps the simplest answer one could give to this question would be to say that they have not lived up to their stated aims, but, while that statement appears to be undoubtedly true, it tells us little. In the survey we undertook in preparing this paper, we heard many reasons why schools and teachers had tried GLCs and found them wanting, but two seemed to recur most frequently: the difficulties that teachers had with concepts and the published materials, and the difficulty experienced in justifying a GLC to the curriculum decision-makers. In addition, we were surprised to find a third common reason reported from schools with significant ESL problems. Each of these reasons requires some comment.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the kind of GLC being introduced

in Australian schools some ten years ago made demands on teachers for which they were ill-prepared. On a superficial level, this could mean that a teacher might have to teach the elements of a foreign language about which he/she knew nothing except what was provided in the text and tapes of the GLC. This could work moderately well to a certain extent, but it was hazardous, and the experience made many teachers uncomfortable. And it could have comical consequences. One teacher told us of a noisy class of tough 12-year old lads being led in their unruly behaviour by a couple of boys from an Italian background. When all other attempts to restore order failed, the teacher suddenly remembered a phrase she had memorised from her GLC tape materials: "Si accommodi, prego," which had been translated as "Please sit down". So she shouted this at the rioting Italian lads, who fell about with laughter at the inappropriateness of the utterance. (It is an extremely formal and polite remark that one might address to a guest whom one has just received into one's home on a formal visit.)

But there is a far more serious side to this matter. The kinds of concepts introduced in GLCs demand a quite sophisticated familiarity with the field of general linguistics (and possibly also with comparative anthropology and sociology). Ten years ago, few Australian foreign language teachers had this sort of background, and this inadequacy revealed itself in the way they handled GLCs: linguistic concepts were distorted; "cultural" information was trivialized; and the exotic was highlighted merely for its novelty value.

Furthermore, it may well be that the issue goes much deeper than this. It may be the case that the key concepts of general linguistics are particularly difficult to popularize without distortion, even by a teacher who has had adequate tertiary training in linguistics. Perhaps linguistics is simply not a study for young minds. We have heard this claim made seriously by eminent scholars in linguistics, who have put a case for the proposition that linguistics should not be an undergraduate discipline at all. While this may sound like the special pleading of mandarins bent upon preservation of their special status, it does seem to be true that fundamental concepts of linguistics are not easy to popularize. And the same may well be true of those concepts from anthropology and sociology which formed the basis of the "cultural" components of GLCs. Whatever the reason, it is clear that many Australian teachers felt uncomfortable and inadequate in handling this sort of material in GLCs.

Many teachers reported to us that they had great difficulty in justifying a GLC to their colleagues and their school Principal. Perhaps the aims were too lofty. In many cases, the decline in serious foreign language study continued unabated, despite the claim that a GLC would stem this decline, because the students would be better prepared for serious foreign language study. When this did

not appear to eventuate, teachers found it difficult to point to any clearly definable outcome of a GLC. And so, in many schools, a counter-reaction set in, along the lines of "If we are going to have foreign language study anyway, why not get straight into it, instead of tinkering around for a year or two with an ill-defined GLC?" The statistical pattern we illustrated above appears to suggest that this kind of thinking has come to be adopted in many schools: a GLC is no longer acceptable as an alternative to the first year or two of foreign language study.

Finally, we found evidence of a somewhat paradoxical situation with GLCs in schools that are known as "schools of high migrant density", i.e., where large numbers of the children come from a non-English-speaking (NES) or limited English (LES) home background. In the early days GLCs seemed to be particularly appealing in such situations: the common GLC formula allowed for the possibility of using the LES children as "informants" for the class to study their home language and culture as one of the sampled illustrative components of the GLC. It was in this sense that the GLC was supposed to provide the LES child with a sense of pride in his/her cultural and linguistic heritage. We have been told, however, that things simply did not work out like this. Drawing upon a number of languages to illustrate comparative linguistic concepts was simply confusing to LES children, and schools quickly abandoned this aspect of a GLC. Direct attempts to consolidate the English competence of such children were preferred. And the modest attempts in GLCs to enhance the prestige of the NES home background soon came to appear quite tokeniatic: such thinking has by now given way to far more radical talk of language rights, and to demands for programmes of bilingual education and mother tongue maintenance. Against the background of such contemporary Australian political thought about the status of non-English languages (sometimes referred to as "CLOTES"- community languages other than English), the approach of earlier GLCs appears trivial indeed.

It is interesting to establish the reasons why GLCs <u>have</u> survived and flourished in a small number of schools. In many ways, they are the converse of the reasons for rejection we have explained above. GLCs have prospered where an enthusiastic, well-prepared teacher has been able to demonstrate the worth of the concept, usually by pointing to a demonstrable "spin-off" in one of two areas: either in increasing student motivation to undertake and persist with foreign language learning, or in integrating the GLC with a school's commitment to multicultural policies. The teachers who were successful in these endeavours stressed to us that these achievements were slow to develop: they depended on a teacher or group of teachers remaining in a school and working at the GLC concept long enough (7-8 years) to evaluate it, modify it and adapt it to changing school needs and policies.

6. Three brief case studies of successful GLCs

As we have been fairly gloomy about the state of GLCs in Australian secondary schools, we feel we should redress the balance by giving a brief account of three successful and well-established GLCs.

Programme "A" operates in a medium-sized state secondary school in an upper middle-class suburb of Melbourne, with a predominantly English-speaking population. The one-year GLC is compulsory in Year 7 (the first year of secondary school), and is followed by a compulsory French course in Year 8. Thereafter (Years 9-12), the study of French is optional, but numbers remain high, and this fact is attributed to the success of the GLC in motivating the students for foreign language study. The GLC is taught in two weekly one-hour lessons, and the curriculum centres around 4 core topics: How Language Began; Development of Our Alphabet; Language Families; Parts of Speech. Each core topic is illustrated with concepts and illustrative examples from a wide variety of languages, and each topic is followed by a series of lessons applying the concepts of the French Language. The teacher uses a wide variety of print and non-print resources, including such things as video programmes about migration to Australia, folktales from many countries, language games and multilingual dictionaries. This is a programme with clear objectives that appears to be working very well.

Programme "B" is in a state secondary school in the western suburbs of Melbourne, in a working-class area where the majority of families are from a NES background. The GLC operates in Year 7, and is compulsory. In year 8, all students must study Greek, Italian or French. From Years 9-12, foreign language study becomes optional, and Greek and Italian are offered. The GLC has three 50-minute lessons per week throughout the school year. The course has two major components: "General Language Communication", which includes work on the origins of language, other forms of communication, the heritage of our language and the history of the English language; and "Comparative Language Studies", which covers a brief introduction to Italian, Greek, Maltese and French, dealing with such matters as geography, greetings, numbers, classroom vocabulary, family structure, the body, animals, colour terms, etc. Once again, a wide variety of books and audio-visual materials is used. This GLC is well-integrated into the innovative language teaching policy of the school.

Programme "C" operates in a very large Catholic secondary school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, serving a decidedly multilingual feeder population, as some 80% of the children come from an NES background, dominated by Italian (about 50% of the school population), but also including significant numbers of speakers of Greek, Maltese, Arabic, Spanish and Yugoslav languages. The NES character of the feeder population is so striking that language questions and

language policy have become the subject of a strong and evolving philosophy in the school. A GLC is compulsory for all students in Year 7, and is called "Multilingual and Cultural Studies". The programme's strength appears to be based on a constant use of the linguistic and cultural resources of the feeder population. After Year 7, all students must choose to do either a foreign language course (French or Italian) or a subject called "Community Language Studies". This choice is binding on all students up to and including Year 10, and even Years 11-12, Community Language Studies is available as an elective. What goes on in Community Language Studies appears to be an amalgam of mother-tongue maintenance and development for LES students, and some elementary sociolinguistic work on the status and use of non-English languages in the local community. The GLC in this school is thus of a well-developed and highly-integrated total school policy on the importance of language studies for all children. Interestingly, the teachers who originally developed the GLC had formal training in linguistics.

7. Conclusion

Even after a decade of experimentation, it is difficult to establish a balanced perspective on the Australian experience with GLCs. It would be invidious for us to suggest any lessons that may be learned from the Australian experience for our British colleagues. However, we are bold enough to conclude by suggesting three considerations that may be relevant. We offer them in no particular order of importance.

(1) GLCs - or indeed any version of "Language Awareness" - are no panacea for the serious problems that beset foreign language teaching throughout the world. Anyone undertaking language awareness work probably needs to make a fundamental decision right from the start: is this course supposed to contribute to the success of the foreign language curriculum, or is it conceived as a curricular component in its own right? It is tempting to try for <u>both</u> orientations, but we believe that this is neither feasible nor effective.

(2) Whatever the orientation chosen, <u>integration</u> with other areas of the curriculum will be both successful and difficult to achieve. Mother-tongue English is the obvious candidate for "linkage", but, in our experience it is the most difficult to establish. The early writers of GLC materials in Australia all stressed the desirability of links with English teachers and their programmes, but these never eventuated. The typical pattern with Australian GLCs was that there was very little integration with <u>any</u> other part of the curriculum; where there was any, it was with areas like geography, social studies, visual arts and home economics, and never with English. The traditional subject "walls" are very hard to penetrate.

(3) We believe that the question of age is crucial. Australian

GLCs have been a phenomenon of the junior secondary school, and perhaps they erred in trying to impose mature considerations on young minds. It may be the case that language awareness is more appropriate for the later years of secondary education.

GLCs and the language awareness movement are curricular innovations and, like all movements, they inevitably face problems of self-definition and evolving clarification. While the GLC movement in Australia has probably not weathered particulary well, we have certainly seen situations where a GLC makes a strong contribution to innovative curricular thinking. We hope that the British language awareness movement, some ten years on from the earliest Australian GLCs, may learn something from what went right and what went wrong in the Australian experience.

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